Attachment and Bonding in Indian Child Welfare
Summary of Research

In the winter of 2016, NICWA research staff reviewed studies published in peer-reviewed journals regarding cultural identity, mental health and well-being benefits, as well as attachment and bonding literature to identify how current research in these fields is relevant to issues raised in child welfare decision making. This brief presents a summary of that literature review. Key research considerations are detailed below.

There are important long-term benefits to being raised with a distinct cultural identity as American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN).

These benefits cannot be compared to studies conducted on adoption with other ethnic groups because of the unique historical circumstances and cultural context of AI/AN communities with historical trauma, genocide, and forced assimilation policies. Recent epigenetic research shows this type of historical trauma is encoded in genes across generations (Yehuda et al., 2016), meaning that trauma happening to parents potentially impacts how genes are expressed in their children. The main way to ameliorate this historical or intergenerational trauma is through enculturation, or helping Native youth to identify with their cultural background and feel pride in it (see La Fromboise et al., 2006). Identification with a particular cultural background and a secure sense of cultural identity is associated with higher self-esteem, better educational attainment (grades and going to college), and is protective against mental health problems, substance use, and other issues for adolescents and adults (LaFromboise et al., 2006; Walls et al., 2016; Martinez and Dukes, 1997; Roberts et al., 1999; Schweigman et al., 2011). The primary acquisition of values and social skills unique to a particular cultural group happen in adolescence, and the benefits of acquiring social skills rooted in culture should be highlighted.

Further, the formation of cultural identity occurs over the course of childhood and early adulthood—and the formation process is not completed by the time early childhood ends. Studies showing culture is a protective factor in mental health for Native adults and adolescents are numerous—there are at least 22 empirical studies looking at this issue, some with large sample sizes (hundreds of data points), over the last 30 years (LaFromboise et al., 2006; Walls et al., 2016; Martinez and Dukes, 1997; Roberts et al., 1999; Schweigman et al., 2011). There is also a large body of studies showing that forced acculturation (meaning being forced to be part of a culture group that is not one's own) has specific deleterious effects on mental health and psychological well-being for AI/AN people specifically, including increased risk of suicide, substance use, and depression (see LaFromboise et al., 1993 for a comprehensive review of these previous studies going back to the 1950s).

We must look at benefits to children over the course of their lives when considering what is in their best interest.

Arguments about best interest should not be limited to early childhood. We must consider the benefits of reunification with birth family, extended family members (tribal or non-tribal family members), versus the benefits of staying with a foster family or pre-adoptive placements for the child when they are an adolescent, young adult, and beyond to when they are a fully mature adult. Recent neuroscience studies have shown that the brain continues to mature into the early 20s and is not fully formed until approximately age 25 (see Johnson, Blum, and Giedd, 2009 for a review of relevant neuroimaging and neuroscience studies on the adolescent and young adult brain). Even after that, neuroplasticity (meaning the potential of the brain to develop) continues, and brains continue to change and grow throughout the lifespan (Johnson, Blum, and Giedd, 2010). ICWA opponents do not fully account for nuanced research on brain development across the lifespan. Their allegations that early childhood traumas cause irreversible harm are applied out of context. Although the research shows that adolescents who suffer from numerous traumatic experiences or emotional stress are at risk of developing mental health issues and substance use disorders in adulthood, the research does not indicate that these harms are inevitable. In fact, recent studies emphasize the resilience of the adolescent brain (Johnson, Blum, and Giedd, 2009).

Child development research has moved beyond traditional psychology bonding and attachment arguments to show that the entire psychosocial environment matters a great deal in psychological health promotion.

New studies in developmental psychology, family therapy, and anthropology over the last 10 years have developed an ecological model for child development. Experts in all of these fields write about human psychological development as being shaped by a "niche"—which is a developmental or ecological environment within which the person's psychology is shaped (Super and Harkness, 2002; Albert and Trommsdorff, 2014; Falicov, 2003). This niche includes, but is not limited to, the entire context a child grows up in, including parents, caregivers, teachers, their school, and their community. Policymakers have noted the promise of this research and are promoting a holistic framework of child well-being into new and existing policy initiatives (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2012).

Studies looking at developmental niches emphasize the importance of consistency throughout different parts of the environment in cultural values, practices, and identity as being key determining factors for a sense of "groundedness", meaning a strong sense of self and coherence in one's self-identity (Super and Harkness, 2002; LaFromboise et al., 1993). For example, if school, parents, and other adults in an adolescent's life give similar messages about what values are important, and what aspects of their identity are strength-giving, the adolescent will have less conflict with his/her parents/caregivers and a more coherent sense of his/her values. ICWA opponents may argue that a foster family could provide this sort of consistency in values and identity through sending a child to a school that shares the values taught at home. However, Native parents will have access to the very specific values, culture, beliefs, and customs held by their tribe that are not likely to be available to non-Native foster parents given that oral history remains a powerful way of passing down culture within tribes across generations. Developmental psychologists view the transmission of values and cultural knowledge across generations to be a key psychological developmental milestone that is achieved during adolescence (Albert and Trommsdorff, 2014), and is critical for a young person to have a clear sense of "groundedness"

and coherency in identity as part of his or her cultural community (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Mainstream sources on culture (e.g., readings on the internet or attending museum exhibits about Native people, as a non-Native foster family may do) are unlikely to provide this same sense of immersion in community and corresponding achievement of developmental milestones related to psychological internalization of values/cultural identity.

Furthermore, research studies done with AI/AN adults who were adopted by non-Native parents demonstrate that these adoptees may be at elevated risk for mental health problems in adulthood. Although the research on this topic is limited, a recent study provides compelling results (Landers, Danes, and White Hawk, 2015). This survey of AI/AN adults who were adopted by non-Native parents demonstrates much higher mental health problems than would be expected in the general AI/AN population. These adults provide direct qualitative narratives stating that for them, cultural connection to Native identity is the only way they have been able to heal from a sense of confusion and lack of coherence in their identity. The studies cited above demonstrate the significant value of a developmental niche/environment that provides AI/AN adolescents and young adults with consistent messages about cultural identity and values; it protects against the risk of mental health problems.

Finally, ICWA opponents interpret attachment theory in an ethnocentric framework that centralizes Western ways of raising children (Neckoway, Brownlee, and Castellan, 2007). Opponents assume (although do not explicitly say) that the best way to raise a child is with a strong attachment to one caregiver. They use rhetoric based in the Western psychological model of attachment, which places primary importance on a child's relationship with his/her mother. However, attachment theory has now expanded beyond the infant-mother dyad that was central to earlier psychology literature (Falicov, 2003; Albert and Trommsdorff, 2014). ICWA opponents do not acknowledge studies

showing that children can, and do, develop attachments to more than one caregiver. Many anthropological cross-cultural studies show that children are raised, and thrive, in many different family structures (see book edited by Lancy (2008) for review of cross-cultural studies on childhood). Traditional AI/AN family structures (before European contact) varied across tribes but one common element was the extended family group (Waldman, 2006). These extended family structures are still common today. Some tribes were organized around clan systems, which included several extended families and had specific relationships, responsibilities, and obligations. Children were raised within these extended family systems, and many people in addition to biological relatives were involved with raising AI/AN children. This kinship structure was key to instilling in children a sense of connection to, and responsibility for, the community as a whole (Waldman, 2006).

The key to mental health and psychological well-being is for children to be raised in a developmental niche that gives consistent messages about values and identities (Super and Harkness, 2002) as noted above. Mental health and well-being benefits from child-rearing that is centered in passing on cultural identity must be considered, and groundedness in cultural identity should not be overshadowed with research on attachment in dyadic relationships that does not account for cultural differences. Cultural identity and traditional AI/AN family structures support positive self-identify. Stability and permanency in sense of self (which is strengthened by coherent cultural identity for AI/AN peoples) and cultural values are increasingly important as children grow into adolescence and young adulthood per recent literature in diverse fields, including anthropology, developmental psychology, and family therapy.

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